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# The Marcos Regime Is Tottering But Where Can the U.S. Turn?

By William Branigin

**A**S A U.S. FOREIGN policy crisis, the Philippines has all the ingredients: a growing communist insurgency that an aging president, a longtime U.S. ally, no longer seems able to control; a major U.S. stake in the country that includes two big military bases and investments worth more than \$1 billion, and a large measure of prestige tied up with the fate of America's only former colony.

The signs are increasing that the archipelago of nearly 53 million people is shaping up as a flashpoint that could become a foreign policy crisis for President Ronald Reagan before his term is up. Should the Philippines, with its 87-year association with the United States as a colony and ally, come under communist rule, American foreign policy would at least suffer a serious loss of face in Asia if not also a loss of a significant strategic base of operations.

In a nutshell the problem is this: President Ferdinand Marcos, 67, has become the communist rebels' greatest asset and a liability for U.S. policy. Entrenched in power for 20 years — longer than all previous Philippine presidents combined since the United States granted independence in 1946 — Marcos presides over a government widely viewed as tired, corrupt and inept and that seems incapable of instituting the genuine and sweeping reforms needed to redeem the situation and roll up the insurgency.

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**T**o draw the conclusion that the communists are gaining is not to overestimate the capabilities of the insurgents. No one is predicting an imminent takeover by the communists, who have been fighting Marcos for 17 years in a Mao-inspired "protracted people's war" aimed at gradually gaining control of the countryside and encircling the nation's cities.

But even the communists have been expressing surprise lately at how fast their struggle has accelerated, and their literature holds out the prospect of advancing their cautious timetable for military offensives combined with "popular uprisings" to establish a "People's Democratic Republic of the Philippines."

In their latest publication, the communists

forecast a "strategic stalemate" between the New People's Army and government forces "within the next three to five years." However, this "revolutionary scenario" could accelerate rapidly if the political struggle outpaces the armed insurgency, as was the case in the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua, according to the communist assessment.

"With the unprecedented advance of the armed and political struggles, there is no more doubt that the U.S.-Marcos fascist reign is drawing to an end," the communist publication said.

A few years ago, Western and Philippine analysts tended to dismiss the prospect of a communist insurgent takeover here as far-fetched. Now, with the way things are going, some see it as distinctly possible, maybe even inevitable.

"Filipinos are going to make lousy communists," one Western intelligence source said recently. His comment presumed an eventual communist victory, which he was sure would prove painful for free-wheeling Filipinos unaccustomed to much discipline.

**T**he United States, in all this, has been reduced to little more than a concerned bystander. U.S. leverage with Marcos is limited by the need to maintain two large military bases, Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base, that U.S. strategists consider vital to American and regional security interests. Some analysts consider U.S. policy on the Philippines virtually "hostage" to Marcos because of the bases.

Although no U.S. official will say it out loud, there is clearly a body of opinion that wishes Marcos would make a graceful exit before it is too late. This school of thought sees a new government as the only hope for meaningful reforms of an abusive, unpopular and inefficient military, a judicial system largely beholden to Marcos and a monopoly-ridden economy long dominated by a few powerful cronies of the president. This school also believes that almost anyone who heads it would be an improvement, with the notable exception of Marcos' erratic wife, Imelda.

The longer Marcos remains in power, according to this argument, the greater the communists' prospects of gaining ground since Marcos is in effect a unifying and radicalizing force for the underground opposition.

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